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## **DECISION MEMO**

Agricultural and Livestock Water Conveyance System Easement  
For Larry Striegel, 1 Facility  
Under the Act of October 27, 1986

White River National Forest  
Region 2, USDA Forest Service

### **I. DECISION**

#### **A. Description of Decision**

I have determined that Larry Striegel and the Campbell Creek Ditch located on the White River National Forest, qualify for a Ditch Bill Easement and I have decided to condition the ditch bill easement by issuing an Operation and Maintenance (O&M) plan developed for, and specific to, this easement. I have determined that implementation of the O&M plans will not result in any significant change in the use and management or impacts of the facilities, so any deviation from effects experienced in the past will be minimal.

#### **B. Purpose of Decision**

The Act of October 27, 1986, amended Title V of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of October 21, 1976 (FLPMA) (43 U.S.C. 1761; 90 Stat. 2776) to authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to issue permanent easements without charge for water conveyance systems used for agricultural irrigation or livestock watering. The Act, commonly referred to as the Colorado Ditch Bill, requires that an easement must be granted for each individual facility if an applicant meets specific requirements and if the water system meets all criteria of the Act.

The applicant applied for an easement under the Colorado Ditch Bill. It has been determined that the applicant and facilities meet all the requirements of the Act; therefore an easement must be issued.

Granting such easements is non-discretionary and, therefore, not a Federal action subject to analysis or review (FSM 2729.16f). However, analysis was conducted to determine if there was a need for additional conditioning of the easement for operation and maintenance activities, and for the protection of Threatened, Endangered, or Sensitive (TES) Species. The purpose of making a decision for each facility is to document any environmental concerns associated with the operation and maintenance of the facility, their potential effect on TES Species, and to document the need for any additional conditioning of the easement that may be necessary to protect the environment from degradation due to the continued operation of the water conveyance systems.

### **II. Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Decision**

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement or Environmental Assessment when they are within one of the categories identified by

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the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 7 CFR part 1b.3 or one of the categories identified by the Chief of the Forest Service in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 sections 31.1b or 31.2, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative environmental effect.

### **A. Category of Exclusion**

My decision to apply terms and conditions to this easement via the O&M plan is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement pursuant to Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, 31.2. The components of this project fit within the context of either Category 3: "Approval, modification, or continuation of minor special uses of National Forest System lands that require less than five contiguous acres of land" or, Category 15: "Issuance of a new special use authorization for a new term to replace an existing or expired special use authorization when the only changes are administrative, there are no changes to the authorized facilities or increases in the scope or intensity of authorized activities, and the applicant or holder is in full compliance with the terms and conditions of the special use authorization." Category 3 facilities are those which were found to have no previous formal authorization, but which are qualified for, and will be authorized by Ditch Bill easement. Category 15 facilities were previously authorized under a special use permit, which will now be replaced by the easement. Use will generally remain the same in either case.

In addition, after reviewing the project with White River National Forest specialists, I have determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances that might cause the action to have significant effects. This conclusion is based on information presented in this document, review of the proposal, the entirety of the Planning Record as well as personal knowledge of similar past projects and professional judgment.

### **B. Resource Conditions Related to Extraordinary Circumstances**

There are no conditions that would constitute a significant effect on an extraordinary circumstance related to the proposed authorization. This conclusion is based on evaluation of the following items:

1. *Federally Listed Threatened, Endangered, Proposed (TEP) and Forest Service Sensitive Species or Designated Critical Habitat*

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires that federal activities do not jeopardize the continued existence of any species federally listed or proposed as threatened or endangered, or result in adverse modification to such species' designated critical habitat. These facilities have been in existence for many years and are generally in close proximity to private property. No additional habitat change will occur under this authorization, and populations existing in the area would not be subject to additional effects in the foreseeable future.

In 1995 a Biological Assessment (BA) for Proposed, Threatened, or Endangered wildlife species determined that the proposed action would have no effect on bald eagles, peregrine falcons or their habitat. At this time a separate BA was prepared that addressed the four endangered fish species and submitted to the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for concurrence. A Biological

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Opinion (BO # GJ-6-CO-95-F-032-COKANUT) by the USFWS was rendered on January 23, 1996. The Biological Opinion stated the proposed action may affect the endangered Colorado pikeminnow (*Ptychocheilus lucius*), razorback sucker (*Xyrauchen texanus*), humpback chub (*Gila cypha*), bonytail (*Gila elegans*) and their designated critical habitat due to annual water depletions related to the proposed action. However, the USFWS determined that a prudent alternative for individual projects to avoid jeopardizing the four endangered fish species or their habitat in the Upper Colorado River Basin would be for each facility owner to enter into a Recovery Agreement as part of the Recovery Implementation Program Recovery Action Plan developed for the endangered fish species'.

In May 2007 another Biological Assessment for Proposed, Threatened or Endangered species was prepared for the four endangered fish, Canada lynx and bald eagles for multiple Ditch Bill Easement facilities including the Campbell Creek Ditch and submitted to the USFWS for Concurrence. A Biological Opinion (BO # GJ-6-CO-07-F-004-TAILS 65413-2007-F-0186) by the USFWS was rendered on September 7, 2007 and is included here as current consultation for terrestrial species. The USFWS concurred with the determination that the proposed action is not likely to adversely affect the Canada lynx. Our BA also determined that there would be no effect on the bald eagle, the USFWS stated in their BO that the bald eagle was removed from the list of federally listed threatened species, effective August 8, 2007, but would continue to be protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. No additional Threatened, Endangered and Candidate species would be affected by this decision.

Sensitive Species (FSM 2670): Forest resource specialists conducted wildlife, aquatic and plant reviews for each facility and a Biological Evaluation (BE) was prepared. The BE analysis determined that the proposed action would have "no impact" on any of the sensitive species.

The issuance of this easement would not contribute to, or involve any extraordinary circumstances that would affect the viability of any White River NF sensitive species. This action would not result in negative consequences to sensitive species populations from the standpoint of affecting viability at the Forest level. The stipulations contained within the easement and the standard O&M Plans will result in protection of sensitive plant and animal species.

## *2. Floodplains and Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds*

Floodplains: Executive Order 11988 requires the agency to determine whether the improvement authorized in this decision will occur in floodplains, and if so, to include appropriate restrictions. The irrigation facilities will be maintained to function effectively and to convey irrigation water to the easement holder's property. The water conveyance and storage infrastructure occupies a relatively small percentage of floodplains and should have no effect on flood stage.

Wetlands: Executive Order 11990 requires the agency to avoid adverse impacts associated with destruction or modification of wetlands. Inspection of the facilities did not document any significant wetland impacts from use of the facilities. Based on the following facts, this decision will not result in significant wetlands-related impacts:

- Each of these facilities has been in use for 30 – 100+ years on the Forest
- The historic use of the facilities will continue

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- The documented lack of detrimental wetland impacts associated with their use
  - Stipulations have been included for future resource conservation

Municipal Watersheds: This decision will not affect municipal watersheds.

### *3. Congressionally Designated Areas*

These facilities are not in Wilderness or within a Wild and Scenic River corridor or other special interest area. No congressionally designated areas will be affected by this decision.

### *4. Inventoried Roadless Areas*

No new roads will be established and no new construction of roads is proposed. The decision to authorize the easement will not change or affect inventoried roadless areas.

### *5. Research Natural Areas*

There are no candidates or designated Research Natural Areas near the facilities included in this decision. This decision will not affect candidate or designated Research Natural Areas.

### *6. American Indians Religious or Cultural Sites, Archeological Sites or Historic Properties*

The Forest archeological staff made a determination that there are no known religious, cultural, archeological or historical sites that will be negatively affected by the operation and maintenance of the facilities included in this decision. The Forest's determinations were forwarded to the Colorado State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) prior to making this decision. A stipulation included within the easement requires the holder to notify the authorized officer of any and all antiquities or other objects of historic or scientific interest that may be found. Future activities that may be proposed by the holder and are outside the scope of routine operations and maintenance authorized by this decision are subject to further archeological review.

## **Additional Resources Considered**

Additional resources that occasionally may be considered as relating to extraordinary circumstances were also considered for this decision. Terms and conditions have been included in the Easement and O&M Plan in order to minimize the potential for adverse impacts to these resources.

#### **a. Invasive Species**

Invasive species are considered a primary threat to National Forest System lands. The Easement and O&M Plan contain clauses intended to help reduce, minimize, or eliminate the potential for introduction, establishment, spread, and impact of invasive species. These clauses govern use of weed-free seed, hay and mulch, treatment and control of invasive species and use of pesticides.

#### **b. Soil Erosion and Gullyng**

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The Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook, FSH 2509.25, Chapter 10, Management Measure 8 states, "Manage water-use facilities to prevent gully erosion of slopes and to prevent sediment and bank damage to streams."

Each easement holder is responsible for prevention and control of soil erosion and gully. All facilities were inspected and where appropriate, a stipulation has been incorporated into the O&M Plan that requires each holder to regulate channel flows to maintain adequate freeboard above the water line in the facility. Maintenance of freeboard is intended to minimize the possibility of ditch failure and the associated gully that can occur. It will also help to protect aquatic resources in the affected stream channel by reducing sediment loads caused by overtopping or ditch failure. In some cases the historic operations of the facility has contributed to the establishment of desirable wetland complexes that should be maintained and the potential for sediment loading, erosion or ditch failure was determined to be minimal so the above mentioned stipulation was not incorporated into the O&M Plan.

Language within stipulations requires holders to be responsible for inspection of diversion and headgate structures to ensure proper function and to inspect the facility periodically through out the operating season and after major storm or flow events and make necessary repairs.

These stipulations are important for meeting the requirements to minimize damage under FLPMA Sec. (505), as well as meeting the intent of Management Measure 8 of FSH 2509.25.

c. Access

Motorized equipment would only be allowed across existing access routes for operation and maintenance of each facility. Some facilities may require access along routes that are not open to the general public. Any motorized vehicle use of routes across National Forest that are not open to the general public will require written authorization by the Authorized Officer.

**Public Involvement**

Scoping to solicit issues and concerns related to the proposed action was accomplished through:

- Processing of the 2006 White River National Forest Ditch Bill easements was initially published in the 4th quarter of the 2006 (July 1, 2006) Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) for the White River National Forest. It has remained on every quarterly SOPA update since that time.
- A mailing addressing the proposed action was sent to potentially interested or affected organizations and individuals on August 16, 2006. Included in this mailing were; four members of Congress, County Commissioners, Colorado Division of Wildlife, Colorado River Water Conservation Board, Colorado Division of Water Resources, North West Colorado Council of Governments, Trout Unlimited, Wilderness Workshop, Eagle River Watershed Council, Roaring Fork Conservancy, Colorado Environmental Coalition, Farm Bureau, Wilderness Society, all Ditch Bill applicants or their designated attorneys, among others.

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- Posting the scoping letter, maps and associated information on the public website at: [http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/whiteriver/projects/ditch\\_bill/index.shtml](http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/whiteriver/projects/ditch_bill/index.shtml)
  - This proposal was scoped and reviewed internally and included site visits by resource specialists.

Five responses to scoping were received. The comments primarily addressed eligibility requirements, use of categorical exclusions for issuing the authorizations, conditioning the O&M Plans and administering the easements. No site-specific comments were received for these facilities. No issues or concerns identified extraordinary circumstances or required additional stipulations. A detailed response to the issues raised is part of the project record.

The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for a 30 day comment period following the publication of a legal notice in the Denver Post on December 7, 2012. No comments were received during this formal comment period.

### **Findings Required by Other Laws**

This decision will comply with all applicable laws and regulations. Supporting documentation for these findings is located in the project files. A summary of pertinent laws follow.

**Federal Land Policy Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) as amended by Public Law 99-545, of October 27, 1986 (Colorado Ditch Bill):** All applications and supporting documentation for the listed facilities were determined to meet the qualifying criteria established by Public Law 99-545 and further described in FSM 2729.16a. In addition, other Federal laws were evaluated to determine whether additional terms and conditions for the ongoing operation and maintenance of the qualifying facilities were needed. Additional terms and conditions considered appropriate are included in the Operation and Maintenance plan attached to each easement.

**National Forest Management Act:** This action is consistent with management direction in the 2002 - White River National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan as required by the National Forest Management Act (FSM 1922.41 & FSH 1909.12). It also conforms to current Forest Service policy and regulations.

**National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA):** Conditioning these easements via the O&M Plans is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement pursuant to Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, 31.2, 15. This Decision Memo documents the environmental review. Supporting information is contained in the project files.

**National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA):** In addition to the discussion under section (f) of Resource Conditions Related to Extraordinary Circumstances, each easement includes clause X-17 under section 13. Special Provisions which requires that "The holder shall immediately notify the authorized officer of any and all antiquities or other objects of historic or scientific interest..." Before proceeding with any activity, the holder must acquire authorization from the authorized officer.

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**Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898)** - This Order requires consideration of whether projects would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. This decision complies with the Act, as it is not expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

**Effects of Action on Social Groups** - There will be no effects on minorities, Native Americans, women or the civil liberties of any other American citizen.

**Effects on Prime Rangeland, Forest Land and Farm Land** - The decision is in compliance with Federal Regulations for prime range, forest and farm lands. There will be no effect on NFS grazing allotments. The facilities being authorized convey water to private lands for beneficial use in agricultural irrigation and livestock watering.

**Energy Requirements and Conservation Potential** - The action will not result in a change in energy requirements or conservation potential.

**Air Quality** - The project will have no long-term effect on air quality. Some minor intermittent and localized effect may result from maintenance activities.

**Wild and Scenic Rivers Act** - There are no designated Wild or Scenic Rivers impacted by the operation of these facilities.

**Endangered Species Act** - There are no conditions that would constitute a significant effect on Threatened, Endangered and Proposed species.

#### **Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities**

No substantive comments expressing concerns were received during the legal comment period therefore pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12 this decision is not subject to appeal. Implementation of this project may begin immediately.

#### **Contact**

For further information about this decision, please contact Rick Haskins, Realty Specialist, White River National Forest, 0094 County Road 244, Rifle, CO 81650; Phone (970) 625-6843.

#### **Responsible Official Signature**



Brian Ferebee  
Deputy Regional Forester  
Rocky Mountain Region, R2  
Forest Service, Department of Agriculture

4/20/13  
Date

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